

SERIAL STORY

The Sable Lorcha

BY
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SYNOPSIS.

Robert Cameron, capitalist, consults Philip Clyde, newspaper publisher, regarding anonymous threatening letters he has received. The first promises a sample of the writer's power on a certain day. On that day the head is mysteriously cut from a portrait of Cameron while the latter is in the room. Clyde has a theory that the portrait was mutilated while the room was unoccupied and the head later removed by means of a string, unbolting by Cameron. Evelyn Grayson, Cameron's niece, with whom Clyde is in love, finds the head of Cameron's portrait nailed to a tree, where it had been used as a target. Clyde advises Evelyn to seek Clyde warns that a Chinese boy employed by Philatus Murphy, an artist living nearby, had borrowed a rifle from Cameron's lodgekeeper. Clyde makes an excuse to call on Murphy and is repulsed. He pretends to be investigating alleged infractions of the game laws and speaks of finding the head of an opium pipe under the tree where Cameron's portrait was found. The Chinese boy is found dead next morning. While visiting Cameron in his dressing room a Mall Greyhound is mysteriously snatched. Cameron becomes seriously ill as a result of the shock. The third letter appears mysteriously on Cameron's sick bed. It makes threats against the life of Cameron. Clyde tells Cameron the envelope was empty. He tells Evelyn everything and plans to take Cameron on a yacht trip. The yacht picks up a mysterious found drifting helplessly in a boat. He gives the name of Johnson. Cameron disappears from yacht while Clyde's back is turned. A fruitless search is made for a motor boat seen by the captain just before Cameron disappeared. Johnson is allowed to go after being closely questioned. Evelyn takes the letters to an expert in Chinese literature, who pronounces them of Chinese origin. Clyde seeks assistance from a Chinese fellow student, who recommends him to Yip Sing, most prominent Chinaman in New York. The latter promises to seek information of Cameron among his countrymen. Among Cameron's letters is found one from one Addison, who speaks of seeing Cameron in Peking. Cameron had frequently declared to Clyde that he had never been in China. Clyde calls on Dr. Addison. He learns that Addison and Cameron were at one time intimate friends, but had a falling out over Cameron's denial of having been seen in Peking by Addison. Clyde goes to meet Yip Sing, sees Johnson, attempts to follow him into a basement, meets a man, and becomes unconscious. Clyde is found by Miss Clement, a missionary among the Chinese. He is sick several days as a result of inhaling charcoal fumes. Evelyn tells Clyde of a peculiarly acting anesthetist which renders a person temporarily unconscious. Murphy is discovered to have mysterious relations with the Chinese. Miss Clement promises to get information about Cameron. Blump in Crystal Consolidated, of which Cameron is the head, is caused by a rumor of Cameron's illness. Clyde finds Cameron on Fifth avenue in a dazed and emaciated condition and takes him home. Cameron awakes from a long sleep and speaks in a strange tongue. He gives orders to an imaginary crew in Chinese fashion. Then in terror cries: "I didn't kill them." Evelyn declares the man is not her uncle. Evelyn and Clyde call on Miss Clement for promised information and find that the Chinaman who was to give it has just been murdered. Miss Clement gives Clyde a note asking him to read it after he leaves the mission and then destroy it. It tells of the abduction of a white man by Chinese who shipped him back to China. The man is accused of the crime of the "Sable Lorcha," in which 100 Chinamen were killed. The appearance in New York of the man they supposed they had shipped to China throws consternation into the Chinese. The brougham in which Clyde and Evelyn are riding is held up by an armed man.

CHAPTER XXI.

When the Doors Parted.

What immediately followed must have occupied a second or two at most. Yet it seemed to me that for many minutes I sat mute and motionless, staring at the leveled weapon and at the rude black mask behind it; for my brain was superactive and my thoughts were racing.

Instantly I comprehended all that had happened, and the situation, climaxing in my peril, was as clear to me as though I had witnessed the whole chain of events from inception to final execution. The assassination of Ling Fo was to be succeeded by the abduction, perhaps the murder, of Evelyn and myself. Already while we were conversing with Miss Clement our driver had been spirited from the box and one of the enemy mounted in his place. In the rush of my review I recalled that in hurrying Evelyn into the brougham, anxious to be started and away, I had not cast even so much as a glance towards the man in front. At first, in our absorption, and later behind lowered silken shades, we had made no effort to trace our course. Hence our present location was mad-deningly unguessable. We might be far on the East side or far on the West, or we might merely have circled back to within a block or less of the Mission from which we started.

All this, I say, flashed through my brain with inconceivable swiftness as I sat rigid, with eyes on the revolver barrel and the masked face of the shadowy, sinister creature that held it. All this, and more. For in that brief

space I considered one possible course of action after another, groping desperately for a plan of rescue and escape.

In that passing second or two there had been no sound—no word from him at the door; no whisper even from her at my side, who, like myself, sat dumb and inert, stricken to stone by the suddenness of the attack. But for a second or two only this silence and inertia lasted.

That which ensued was coincident. As though the step had been prearranged, the three actors moved in concert. The hand which held the weapon advanced a dozen inches or more. Synchronously my foot, lifted with all the accuracy and power of my undergraduate football days, met the intruding revolver and sent it spinning against the vehicle's upholstered top. Simultaneously, Evelyn screamed. And even as her voice rang out, high and shrill, even as that lethal object of chill-hardened steel spun upward, the light was switched suddenly off and we were in grumous darkness.

It was she who, pressing the button at her side, had dropped over us this mantle of invisibility no less obscuring than the fabled Hel Keplein; and it was she, too, who now opened the other door of the brougham, and with a murmured: "Come! Hurry!" drew me after her into the dread uncertainty of an environment of which we knew nothing.

The gloom without was scarcely less thick than that within. Of my five senses, therefore, all keenly alert, that of sight told me nothing; but my ears and nostrils, aided and abetted by my perception of sudden planing beneath my feet, informed me that we had alighted in a stable. The sound of pounding hoofs echoed from nearby stalls and unmistakable equine odors were strongly pervasive.

Upon my hearing there fell, too, as we fled, the high-pitched nasal cackle of excited and perplexed celestials, whose eyes, dazzled by the brougham's lamps, failed to follow us into that obscurity which lay in the wake of the conveyance, and through which, hand in hand, Evelyn and I crept crouching toward the street, our hearts hammering but our breathing smothered lest it betray our whereabouts and precipitate pursuit.

If in our fond fancy we expected an unimpeded way, however, our expectations were not realized. Where the darkness was densest there rose an obstruction. From out of the black a pair of arms encircled me—a pair of arms, long, sinewy and muscular, which tightened about me with a sudden vise-like pressure, holding me powerless. My hold of Evelyn's hand was thus abruptly sundered, and though she could not see, she sensed the encounter. Once more she screamed. High and shrill her young voice rose above the noise of the stamping horses and the quaintly strident chatter of the confused Mongolians. It was not so much a mere cry of fright as it was an appeal for help. And it met with surprisingly prompt response.

Before its echo had died, the double sliding doors which separated our stable dungeon from the sidewalk were swept swiftly apart, admitting the revealing gleam from a street lamp across the way, and admitting, too, the husky, commanding figure of a man with raised revolver, followed by a mob of neighborhood denizens attracted by the unusual and excited by the girl's penetrating vociferation.

Quickly as I had been seized, even more quickly was I released. The encircling arms fell away instantly, and the giant who had held me turned with an oath of defiance and confronted the invaders. In both oath and attitude there was a reminder of something heard and seen before; and treading upon the heels of reminder came recognition. It was Philatus Murphy, red and burly, who now towered menacingly above our armed savior. It was Philatus Murphy who, swinging viciously for his adversary's jaw, staggered back the same instant, his arm dropping and a bullet in his shoulder.

For a moment following the shot there was dead silence. Then came pandemonium. The mob, already augmented from a score to a hundred, surged into the stable as a spring food surges over broken dams. With Evelyn in a corner behind me I fought off the crowding, bellowing throng, while Murphy lay groaning at our feet, and his assailant, who, when once his face met the light, I discovered was O'Hara, my own detective, smashed heads right and left with the butt of his revolver, and hoarsely commanded room for his fallen enemy.

What might have happened, what fatalities might have ensued, had it not been for the fortuitous arrival of three uniformed members of the metropolitan police force I shall not attempt to conjecture. Their clubs, I know, did good service; and a shot or two fired over the heads of the rioting crowd had a wonderfully pacifying effect.

Poor Evelyn, in spite of an heroic stubborn insistence to be courageous, was as thoroughly frightened as I have ever seen her. When, at length, the stable was cleared, and lamps were lighted, she was still pallid as marble, and her lip quivered with an obstinacy that no restraining teeth nor hiding hand could disguise.

"Oh! Wasn't it exciting?" she exclaimed, with an effort at nonchalance that was almost pathetic. "I wouldn't have missed this experience for anything in the world." And then, discovering a little trickle of blood on my cheek, which a diligently pilled handkerchief had not fully succeeded in keeping out of sight, she was at once all solicitude. "Oh, Philip!" she cried, with wide eyes, whispering: "You're hurt! It was awful. It was heart-breaking! I wish we had never dared—who did it? Do you know? Was it a knife cut? Was it—?" And so she rattled on, her own life swallowed up at length in her anxiety over my insignificant injury.

Murphy, meanwhile, had sunk into insensibility through loss of blood, and lay now, breathing stertorously. One of the officers had already telephoned for an ambulance and the other two were making a diligent search of the stable. As for the Chinamen, they had fled at the first alarm, and it looked very much as if every one in any way connected with the outrage, save only Murphy, had gone with them.

O'Hara, who had been put, nominally, under arrest, and who was now awaiting the pleasure of his captors, availed himself of the first moment of Evelyn's silence to address me.

"It's been a long chase," he said—and there was something of pride in his tone—"but you see I got him dead to rights at last. He's mixed up with the most lawless gang of highbinders New York has known for years. I haven't got down to all his history yet, but I've been handed a good stack of it, and it won't be hard to put the screws on him now for killing that Chinik that used to work for him up to Coe Cob. I didn't know it was you he was after tonight, but I do know that he had a hand in the plot that fixed another Chinik this very evening—a young fellow named Ling Fo, who was pumped full of lead just as he was turning from the Bowery into Pell street."

It was from O'Hara that I learned our present whereabouts. The stable was not more than a half dozen blocks from the intersection of the two streets he had just named.

The fate of our driver we could only conjecture. Before the policeman I laid the facts and they promised me that he should be found. And then, after half an hour's waiting, a substitute driver was secured from a neighboring garage, and Evelyn and I were permitted to continue our interrupted journey homeward.

At the Cameron house, as though our cup of excitement were not already filled to brimming, a fresh experience awaited us—an experience of such vital significance as to overturn entertained conclusions and shed a wholly new light upon our darkest perplexities.

CHAPTER XXII.

The Scuttled Ship.

Checkabedy met us in the hall—an unusually agitated Checkabedy, with his full-jawed, rubicund face ruddy beyond the common, and his tiny gray eyes twinkling like twin star sapphires.

Our adventure, thrilling as it had been, was subjugated, if not indeed for the moment forgotten, in the presence of this unwonted suscitator. For the butler's aplomb was a sort of family fixture which nothing short of the most extraordinary happening could either unsettle or upheave. To find him in such case, therefore, argued either cognizance of exceptional developments or possession of monstrously important tidings; and at sight of him we both paused in mute expectancy.

"There is a person, sir," he began, making vain effort to control his voice to dispassion, "a foreign person—what is called a Chinese, I think, sir—in the reception room. If I understand him, sir, he is a consul or something like that. And he has brought with him a tall, thin, elderly man, as yellow as himself, sir. I was in doubt about allowing them to wait, but they told me they must see you, sir, tonight without fail; that it was a matter to your interest, sir. They have been here over an hour, now, and I have never taken my eye off the reception-room door. Seeing as how those mysterious things happened at Cragholt, sir, I was fearful lest something more of the same sort might be contemplated. And poor Mr. Cameron lying up there with that nurse, Bryan, who, between you and me, sir, I don't trust, now."

Evelyn was scarcely to be blamed for a trepidation equaling, if not surpassing, Checkabedy's.

"Don't see them, Philip," she urged with nervous vehemence. "Please don't see them! It is some trick. I feel it is. Checkabedy will get them out of the house at once. Won't you, Checkabedy?"

But I was in far different mood. Of late matters had been shaping themselves, apparently, towards a climax. In a quiet way, avoiding the spectacularly aggressive, and aided not a little by chance, we had drawn nearer and nearer to the veil which hid the truth. If there had come to me now the opportunity for another step, it must not be disregarded. My whole inclination was to welcome it. Therefore I smiled, reassuringly, at Evelyn, as I said: "Really, my dear girl, you are un-

necessarily alarmed. There is not—cannot be, in fact—the slightest possibility of danger. On the contrary their visit, whoever they may be, is in all likelihood pacific. But if I would make you any less uneasy, Mr. Checkabedy shall wait near the open door, and you yourself shall stop here in the hall, where you can practically see and hear all that goes on."

That she yielded promptly to my argument, pretended, at least, to put aside her fears, and returning me smile for smile, confessed to a consuming curiosity which she had merely endeavored to disguise, was an episode as characteristic of her as any that I can remember.

On entering the reception-room—a somewhat formally furnished, square room, which jutted from the hall, on the left—I was mildly surprised to discover that one of my visitors was none other than the Chinese merchant, Yip Sing. At sight of me he rose and came a step forward, the same tall, spare, dignified Asiatic I had met in the Mott street warehouse, save that he no longer wore the dress of his country, but a dark, well-cut suit of American clothes.

"Permit me, Mr. Clyde," he said, in that chill leisurely tone I so well remembered, "to present to you the vice consul of China at New York, Mr. Chen Mok." And then I saw that his companion, a much shorter man than he and younger, had risen too, and was holding out a hand in tentative greeting.

"We are here," Yip Sing continued, "because we believe we have secured for you, Mr. Clyde, the explanation which you recently did me the honor to request of me. And because we are in hope that, through you, some agreement may be reached which will put an end to the present deplorable outbreak amongst certain of our people in this city."

Vice Consul Chen bowed gravely, and I, in my turn, gestured my visitors to resume their seats. So far I had not spoken, but mentally I had been busy. Frankly, I distrusted Yip Sing, and I questioned how much of his explanation, whatever it might be, I could afford to accept. Fortunately, however, I now had some basis for judgment. I felt that, so far as it went, the letter from Miss Clement could be relied upon absolutely. If the merchant's story coincided, then it would perhaps be safe to assume the correctness of added details. If it did not coincide, I was in possession of valuable material for cross-examination.

"I am an advocate of the policy of reciprocity, Mr. Yip," I said at length. "If, in return for your service, I can render a service to you, you have only to command me."

I chose a chair between them and the door, and sitting down assumed an attitude of attention.

"What I tell you," began the merchant, his body erect, his shoulders squared, his chin lifted, "Mr. Chen will verify." And once more Mr. Chen endorsed his friend's assertion by a grave forward sweep of his head.

"When you came to me, Mr. Clyde, with the story of your friend Mr. Cameron's annoyance and subsequent abduction, I was inclined to the view that you were, yourself, in some way deceived. What I have learned since, corroborates that impression. As you say here in America, your friend, Mr. Cameron, did not play fair with you."

Under ordinary circumstances I might possibly have permitted this assertion to go unchallenged. I am not as a rule truculent; more often than not I find it advisable to ignore preliminary inaccuracies of narration, the quicker to reach the vitals of the narrative. But on this night I was contrarily disposed. The inscrutable countenance and the superior, almost patronizing manner of the speaker chafed and irritated me to the verge of endurance; and so, without hesitation, I interrupted him with a contradiction.

"If all that you have learned is no more reliable than this corroboration," I declared, warmly, "we might as well end the interview here and now. Of Mr. Cameron's fairness at all times and under all circumstances there can be no question. He is my friend, tried and trusted, and incapable of deceit. On that I would stake everything I hold most dear; and we may as well have it clearly understood at the outset."

A white man would either have insisted or apologized. But the yellow man has a way of his own. Yip Sing remained silent until I had finished. But whether or not he heard me was manifested neither by word nor sign. Without change of facial expression or alteration of tone, he placidly proceeded, choosing his phrases with infinite care and rounding his periods with a faculty that for an Asiatic was little short of marvelous. Had he been any one else in the world I should have admired him. As it was, his cleverness only added to my aversion.

"There is a story," he went on, "a true story familiar to all Chinamen; to some Chinamen especially it is a very bitter, a very pathetic story, because it has to do with the passing of their kinsmen—their fathers, their brothers, and their sons. Death sometimes is glorious, as we all know. To die for one's country, or for one's honor, is to be privileged. To die of pestilence or famine is deplorable. But to die by treachery is to leave a poor

legacy to those who follow—a legacy of unrest until vengeance has been wrought."

He paused for just a moment and I moved impatiently. But if I thought to disconcert him by my action I was not rewarded.

"It is possible, Mr. Clyde," he continued, "that you are familiar with the history of the trade in coolies between your country and mine?"

I nodded. "Yes," I answered, "passably familiar. I know that at one time it was black with outrages. I know that in 1882 a Chinese exclusion act was passed, and that in 1892 the Geary law followed."

"But you did not know, perhaps, that in spite of your laws, the smuggling of Chinamen—of Chinese laborers—into this country, has been almost continuously practiced?"

"It is quite possible, I dare say. I do not know the facts, however."

"The facts in a general way are not material," Yip Sing assured me. "But I shall inform you of a single specific case. Sixteen years ago there appeared in Canton a white man, supposedly a Scotchman, calling himself Donald McNish, and representing, according to his own statement, certain large American interests. Through a native agent it became known that McNish was in search of coolies. Very soon, circulars appeared throughout the district, worded somewhat after this fashion: 'To the countrymen of Ah Shoo. Laborers are wanted in the land of California. Great works to be done there, good houses, plenty food. You will get \$20 a month and good treatment. Passage money required, \$45. I will lend the money on good security, but I cannot take your wife and child in pay. Come to Canton, and I will care for you until the ship sails. The ship is good.' The circular was signed by Ah Shoo, the agent. In response to it, exactly ninety-seven of my countrymen, having left good security for the required passage money, were led stealthily aboard a small coasting vessel one night, and the vessel slipped quietly down the Chu-Ki to the open sea, with McNish himself at the helm, and a Eurasian named John Woo, in the galley."

The Vice Consul was now consulting a slip of paper bearing, as I could see, certain Chinese characters.

"If I am in error," said Yip Sing, addressing his companion, "I pray you to correct me." Whereat Mr. Chen Mok smiled reassuringly.

"You are in all particulars accurate," he announced; and the Mott street merchant, thus encouraged, proceeded.

"The vessel, you understand, Mr. Clyde, was what is known in those waters as a lorcha. It was not so large as a junk and it differed in other respects as well. It—"

"I think I have seen a rude, but more or less effective representation of it," I interrupted.

"I know to what you refer," was the speaker's rejoinder. "But that was more or less conventional. As I told you, every child draws boats like that. However, the lorcha was to be used merely to convey the passengers to McNish's steamship, which had already cleared from Hong Kong, and which waited off the coast well out of sight of prying cruisers. Such, at least, was the explanation. Whether McNish ever had a steamship is a matter for conjecture. Whether a United States cruiser of the Pacific Squadron, having received a hint as to his purpose, bore down upon him, as has been said, is likewise open to question. But of the truth of the incidents which followed there can be no dispute."

He hesitated long enough for the Vice Consul to echo: "No dispute, whatever, Mr. Clyde," and continued:

"On the second morning after leaving Canton, an hour after dawn, when he at least pretended to see the cruiser in full chase, he ordered his passengers below, declaring that their safety depended upon their keeping out of sight. No sooner, however, were they below decks than he battened down the hatches, and imprisoned the cook in his galley. A white fog prevailed and the sea was very calm, both of which were conditions favorable to McNish's purpose. Lowering the lorcha's two boats he cut one adrift, and entering the other, which he had previously stocked with stores, he made his way in it along the lorcha's side to her prow."

At this juncture, Yip Sing slowly rose to his feet.

"And now," he said, "I want you to picture what followed. Standing up, axe in hand, Donald McNish began his diabolic work. With strong arm he swung, and close to the water line the blade bit deep into the timbers of the lorcha's bow. He swung again; and again the blade bit deep. Once more, and still once more the axe rose and fell. Frantically, with scissoring purpose he piled his weapon, until there opened a gaping hole through which, upon those ninety-seven trapped souls, rushed the bitter waters of death."

It was a very dramatic recital. Unaccompanied though it was by a single gesture, the speaker's voice lent itself most effectively to the tragedy. And though I disliked and distrusted him, I was certainly more or less impressed by the scene he painted.

(TO BE CONTINUED.)